

Message Text

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42

ACTION EA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 18086

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, TH

SUBJECT: THE SAWAT UTHAISAI AFFAIR

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B) FBIS D140539Z NOV 74

C) FBIS D140900Z NOV 74

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1. BOTH THE ENGLISH AND THE THAI PRESS CONTINUE TO GIVE WIDE COVERAGE TO THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE TRANSFER OF SAWAT UTHAISAI, FORMER TREASURY DIRECTOR GENERAL, MINISTRY OF FINANCE (REF B, C, D). FINANCE MINISTER SOMMAI HUNTRAKUN IS APPARENTLY THREATENING TO RESIGN IF THE ASSEMBLY DEBATE GETS TOO HOT FOR HIM TO HANDLE, AND HIS EXPLANATION OF THE REASONS BEHIND THE TRANSFER DO NOT SATISFY THE PUBLIC. THE "BANGKOK WORLD" REPORTS ON 15 NOVEMBER THAT KHUKRIT PRAMOT HAS EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT MIGHT RESIGN EN MASSE IF THE CALL FOR GENERAL DEBATE AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT OVER THE SAWAT AFFAIR SUCCEEDS. KHUKRIT POINTS OUT THAT THERE WOULD BE CHAOS IN THE COUNTRY IF THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT RESIGNED SINCE THE ELECTIONS ARE STILL TWO AND A HALF MONTHS AWAY.

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2. SAWAT HAS A REPUTATION FOR HONESTY IN THE EYES OF HIS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (NLA) COLLEAGUES AND THE GOVERNMENT. EARLIER THIS YEAR THIS RESPECT SECURED HIM THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE WHICH CONFISCATED AND TABULATED THE ASSETS OF THE OUSTED MILITARY LEADERS. WHEN THE ASSEMBLY WAS CONSIDERING LEGISLATION TO DEAL WITH THE IMPOUNDED ASSETS LAST JULY, SAWAT'S TESTIMONY BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY REVIEW COMMITTEE WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN STIMULATING AN AMENDMENT FROM SOMKHIT SISANGKHOM TO CONFISCATE THE ASSETS UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF ARTICLE 17 OF THE 1972 INTERIM CONSTITUTION. PRIME MINISTER SANYA THAMMASAK'S RESISTENCE TO THE NLA LEGISLATION AROUSED RUMORS THAT HE WOULD RESIGN. THE ISSUE WAS FINALLY SETTLED WHEN THE PRIME MINISTER ACCOMPLISHED THE ENDS OF THE ASSEMBLY, BUT THROUGH DIFFERENT AUTHORITY (BANGKOK 12562). THE WHOLE INCIDENT LEFT STRAINED RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EXECUTIVE AND THE LEGISLATURE WHICH MAY NOW BE COMING TO THE SURFACE.

3. COMMENT: THE SAWAT AFFAIR IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE PROBLEMS AN HONEST, PERFORMANCE-ORIENTED GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL CAN CAUSE IN THE THAI BUREAUCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEM IN MAKING AN EFFORT TO COMBAT CORRUPTION. LOWER LEVEL OFFICIALS RESENT HIS INTERFERENCE IN THEIR ATTEMPTS TO GET IN ON THE TAKE, AS WELL AS HIS PRESSURE TO GET THEM TO WORK HARDER AT THEIR JOBS. SOME HIGH LEVEL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, WHOSE OWN BACKGROUNDS ARE NOT SPOTLESS, BECOME UNEASY.

4. SINCE THE 64 ASSEMBLYMEN WHO SUBMITTED A MOTION CALLING FOR A GENERAL DEBATE DID SO UNDER ARTICLE 158 OF THE CONSTITUTION, IT DOES NOT APPEAR AS THOUGH SOMMAI HAS TO RESIGN. ARTICLE 158 PERMITS DEBATE WITHOUT REQUIRING A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE IN THE GOVERNMENT. WHILE THE MAJORITY OF ASSEMBLYMEN ARE SYMPATHETIC TO SAWAT, IN THE CRUNCH THEY WILL PROBABLY SUPPORT SOMMAI'S POSITION ON THIS ISSUE. WE DO NOT EXPECT A MASS OR EVEN MINOR RESIGNATION OF MEMBERS OF THE SANYA GOVERNMENT.

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